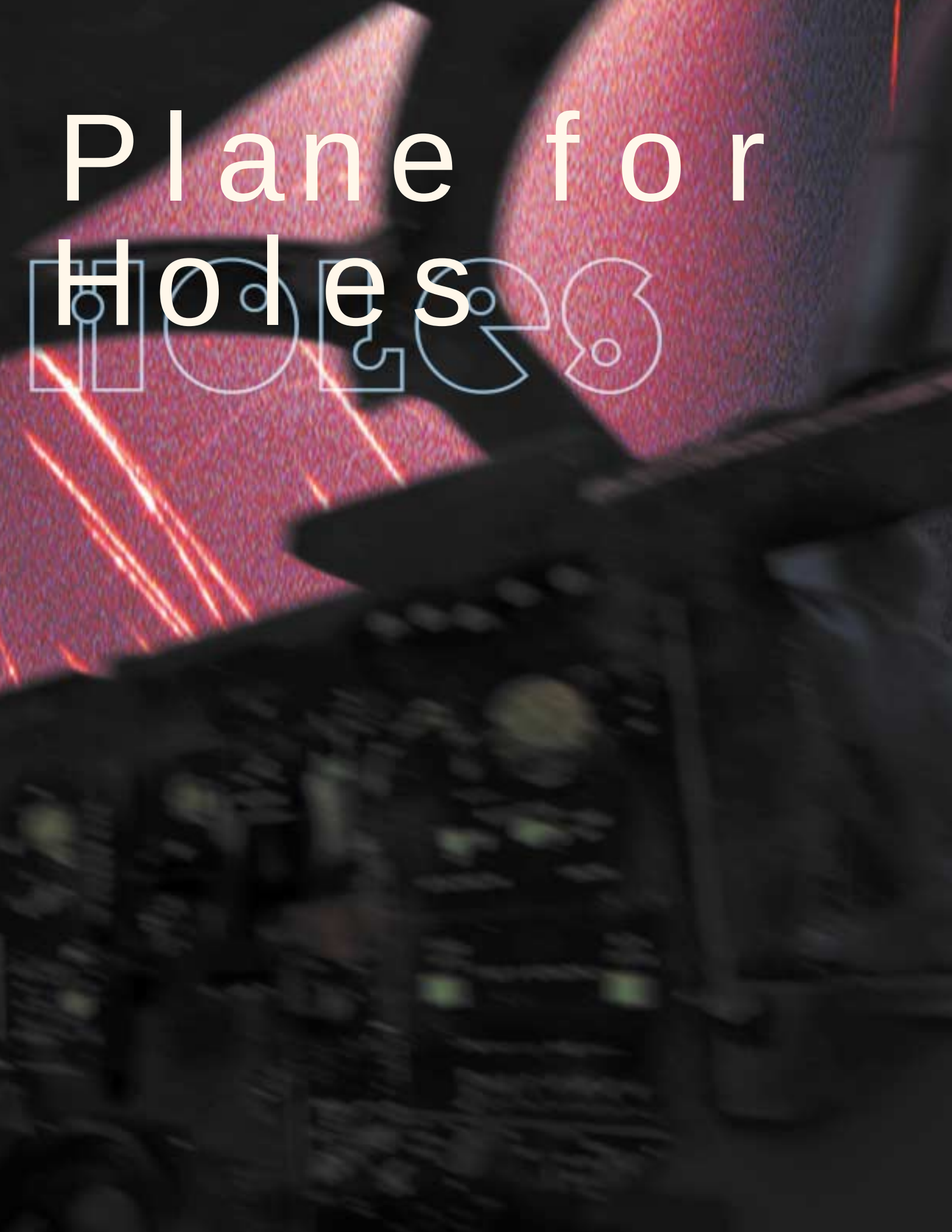
Check This Bullet

by Cdr. Bud Bishop

Tracer rounds flashed across the canopy. More lines of tracers arced ahead of our intended flight path, some above and some below. One enterprising soul off to the right was wildly swinging his mounted machine gun back and forth. The bright yellow tracers from his gun flitted wildly all around us. I silently cursed him. Rick pushed the stick forward, and we began a shallow descent to get under the tracers ahead of us. Neither one of us heard, amidst the cacophony of sounds coming from the missile-warning and attack systems, the ground-proximity warning tone.


Plane for
Holes

increased their power output above redline? I pushed doubt from my mind as I scanned my instruments and radar. There was the Kuwaiti coastline off to the left—a thick, bright orange line glowing on my radar screen.

Around us, invisibly, 11 other aircraft circled; some, like us, carried eight 800-pound cluster bombs. Others carried anti-radiation missiles. Above them, the radar jamming and fighter aircraft set up their stations to protect us from Iraqi aircraft and missiles. Three minutes to go. We were making our final run to our push point, and the pilot was pushing the throttles to their stops.

Push time. We were on our way in. Ahead of us, three other attack aircraft screamed, single-file, towards the target at 500 knots, skimming over the dark waves 200 feet below us. At 15 miles, the two lead aircraft turned left, while my pilot followed the third aircraft to the right. We would converge at our target in 18 minutes, each aircraft dropping its bombs with only 45 seconds separation. Timing was crucial—because our aircraft lights were off to prevent anti-aircraft gunners from tracking us, any variance of timing might result in a midair over the target.

Fourteen miles to the beach. Suddenly, a bright light appeared ahead of us and a missile quickly rose into the air, slowly arcing toward us. We readied ourselves for the split-second timing maneuver that would allow us to dodge the missile as it closed on our aircraft. The light of the missile's plume grew brighter…brighter… then went out as the missile began its ballistic phase of flight. We could no longer see it, and it's hard to avoid what you can't see.

As the seconds passed, we realized the missile had missed. At the same time, it dawned on us that this wasn't going to be any surprise attack. At seven miles, the second missile rose ahead of us. Our lead aircraft should have just crossed the beach by now. Magically, silent ropes of red tracers began arcing across the sky to greet them as the second missile started tracking us. Rick focused on the missile, and, again, we prepared for our avoidance maneuver. And once again, the missile's plume went out, and we turned blindly and waited. It missed, too, and we diverted our attention to the ropes of bullets reaching out to find us. We were over the beach.

We were beginning a 14-minute flight, at 100 to 200 feet, over numerous enemy companies positioned to repel a threatened invasion by our Marines.

The light of tracer rounds flashed across the canopy, white, yellow, red and green, depending on the caliber of weapon. I was struck by the beauty of this July 4th-like display. I didn't know it, but this flight would spell the end of my enjoyment of holiday fireworks displays forever.

Rick pushed the stick forward, and we began a shallow descent. We both suddenly realized that we were about to hit the ground. It was almost like a giant hand came out of the blackness and slapped our helmets. The origin of the bullets and tracers—the gun flashes—were almost at eye level when Rick and I looked back inside the cockpit at the altimeter. It was rapidly unwinding, the big hand on zero and the little hand rapidly passing through 200 feet. Time compression can be a wonderful thing. In hundredths of a second, I noticed that Rick had looked at all the dials and had moved the stick back, that the altimeter had started back up, and that tracers were passing us from all directions.

With the sand dunes roughly 20 feet above sea level, we figured that we had bottomed out in our dive at less than 40 feet (our wing span was a little more than 60 feet)! We rapidly climbed into the thickest part of the tracers. We leveled off at 1,800 feet, flying straight and level through lines of tracers and missiles that we now totally ignored. We both sat back in our seats and tried to breathe normally. That had been too close a call. Rick mentioned something about going down lower, but we both decided that the ground could definitely kill us—the bullets might not.

That's where I learned a lesson that has never left me. If one guy is outside the cockpit, the other needs to be on instruments. If everyone in your flight is heads down in the cockpit, be the guy who looks up. Balance your attention, balance the risk.

Things got worse after our close call. Up ahead, the target defenses were engaging our lead aircraft,

and the black sky was covered by a web of tracers that appeared impenetrable. At this point, my pilot considered aborting. But after a quick look behind us where sky was just as bad, we again focused on prosecuting our target. Moments later, we penetrated the last wall of tracers.

Once through the last defenses, we steadied up our course...we were on government time now, meaning that we would not jink our aircraft until our bombs were released. But, again, our intentions did not reflect reality. In the final seconds of our run, a single line of tracers rose up out of the darkness directly in front of us. There was no way this gunner was going to miss, and Rick jerked the stick left. Immediately, our bombs released and, with our wing down, we launched them to the side of their intended impact point. Rick threw the stick hard right, and I looked back over my shoulder to watch the bomblets ripple across the bow of a merchant ship. I could see flashes of explosions as some of the bomblets landed in the open cargo hatch at the front of the ship. The rest splattered into the warehouse next to the ship.

We completed a climbing right turn, leveling out at 2,000 feet—right into the heart of the missile threat. I keyed the radio for the first time since we began the flight and made the radio call, "Feet wet." Although we still had seven miles to go, I felt we were close enough. Big mistake, and Rick let me know it.

Everyone knew we were the last plane on the strike, so when we actually passed over the beach 45 seconds later and began our climb over water, an Air Force picket, an F-15 fighter, took us for an Iraqi who was trying to chase down the strike group. All we saw in our cockpit, however, was the appearance of a single, bright green strobe that lit up our air-warning receiver. I ignored it, but Rick was still on a hair trigger and told me to contact the AWACS to see what was behind us. The reply from the AWACS chilled us to the bone: "Rustler, you have a bogie at seven miles, mach 1.2. He will have a firing solution in thirty seconds."

While I struggled to deactivate all of the emitters in our aircraft that might aid the bogie (we assumed it was an Iraqi), Rick rolled us upside down and pulled us down towards the dark surface of the water. Ahead, a Navy frigate saw our maneuver, which resembled that of an incoming missile—and armed his weapon system. Before firing, the CO of the frigate asked the F-14 under his control to verify the identity of the incoming "bogey." The F-14, seeing our silhouette against the dawn sky in the east, broadcast the warning "Blue on blue, knock it off, knock it off" to signal the Navy captain to hold his weapons. The F-15 heard the announcement and stopped prosecuting the attack. Rick and I heard the call, believed that the AWACS had saved us, and climbed back to a more fuel-efficient altitude to return to our carrier.

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After we landed, a plane captain, no more than 19 years old, asked if I was OK. "Yes," I replied, "but you need to check this plane for bullet holes before we launch it again." There was not one single hole in the aircraft. Other aircrews, flying high above us and observing our ingress, were amazed any of us survived. Later, a review of the low-light, cockpit video recorder showed that we had unknowingly flown through two towering cargo cranes as we dropped our bombs in the target area. If we had not made that last-minute turn to avoid the single line of tracers in the target area, we surely would have hit one of them.

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